CHAPTER SEVEN

EARLY AMERICAN COLONIAL RULE IN THE PHILIPPINES AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF “FILIPINO” AND “CHINESE” IDENTITIES

Introduction

The main goal of this chapter is to discuss the different factors in the early twentieth century that brought about the homogenization and reification of “Chinese” and “Filipino” ethnic identities. The three main factors to be described here are American imperialism and anti-Chinese racist policies; Chinese nationalism (in China and the Philippines); and Filipino nationalism.

The Coming of the Americans

Toward the end of 1898, members of the American Peace Commission were busy finalizing the terms of the treaty to be signed by Spain and the United States to formally end the Spanish-American war. On 10 December, a treaty was agreed upon which provided that Spain would cede the Philippines, along with its last remaining colonies Guam, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, to the United States for 20 million dollars. Initially, a majority of the members in the U.S. Senate was opposed to the Treaty, but the Senate voted to ratify it after the outbreak of Filipino-American hostilities at the San Juan Bridge on 4 February 1899. Following this incident, the Americans declared war against the government of Emilio Aguinaldo, and the next three years constituted what is often erased from the annals of U.S. history: the Philippine-American War.

During this time, we know very little of the specific responses of Chinese merchants in Manila, except for a few that were recorded.¹

¹ For more information regarding the contributions, participation, and involvement of the Chinese, including those of Ignacio Paua, during the Philippine-American War, see Ang See and Go 1996.
We know, for instance, that Carlos Palanca Tan Quien-sien, while he supported Aguinaldo and his government during the latter’s fight against the Spaniards, cooperated with the new colonial masters. Even though he lost a substantial portion of his wealth when Major-General Elwell S. Otis, commander of the U.S. Army in the Philippines, ordered the abolition of tax farming (from which he built part of his fortune, see Chapter 3), Carlos found a way to earn extra income by supplying the American army with carabaos and transportation, as well as housing for the troops (Wilson 2004, 159). He also appeared in the hearings of the Schurman Commission to give his opinion on the Chinese labor and immigration issues. Toward the turn of the twentieth century, Carlos also campaigned to have his son become the first consul of the Chinese consulate in Manila. He himself became acting consul when his son, who was in China in order to mourn the death of his mother, could not immediately assume the post.

Thus, Carlos, essaying his earlier practice of professing loyalty to both the Spanish king and the Chinese emperor, did not find it difficult to switch his loyalties (from the incipient government of Aguinaldo to the American colonial government), or hold simultaneous ones (to both the Chinese emperor and American colonial government). He lived at a time when both the Chinese and Philippine nation-states were not yet fully formed, so that he and his contemporaries did not conceive themselves yet as part of a “territorial and legal institution with authority and responsibilities, and to which they, as citizens, had binding obligation” (Wilson, 2004, 139).

It would take the United States a few decades to establish a Philippine nation-state. At first, it had to learn more about its new colonial possession and to find ways to control its new colonial subjects. Among the groups of people the U.S. first targeted were the Chinese.

The “Chinaman” Conundrum and The Chinese Exclusion Act

Two months before the Treaty of Paris was signed, the commander of the U.S. Army in the Philippines, Major-General Elwell S. Otis, set about establishing a military government in the Islands. One of the first orders he issued was the application of the Chinese Exclusion Act in the Philippines. This act had been in effect in the United States since 1882, and was designed to restrict the entry of both skilled and unskilled Chinese laborers. The “Otis Order” was a provisional one,